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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BUCHAREST 000115

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STATE FOR EUR/NCE AARON JENSON; NSC FOR ADAM STERLING

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SUBJECT: FOREIGN MINISTER UNGUREANU RESIGNS OVER DETENTION
OF ROMANIAN CONTRACTORS IN IRAQ

REF: A. BUCHAREST 0103

1B. BUCHAREST 0065

Classified By: DCM Mark A. Taplin for Reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

11. (SBU) At Prime Minister Tariceanu's request, Foreign Minister Ungureanu resigned on February 2, following revelations that Ungureanu had not informed the Prime Minister about the arrest last October of two Romanian contractors in Iraq (ref. a). After President Basescu on February 1 corrected an earlier statement and acknowledged he had been informed about the arrest of the contractors last November, the National Liberal Party (PNL) spokesman called for Ungureanu's resignation for not having briefed the Prime Minister, the Romanian head of government. Tariceanu, peeved that he was cut out of the loop, had a convenient pretext for removing Ungureanu, whom many Liberals felt was too closely associated with Basescu and his foreign policy priorities. Ungureanu's refusal in June 2005 to support the PNL position in favor of withdrawing Romania's troops from Iraq -- hurt Ungureanu's standing among the Liberal Party radicals who had felt the Prime Minister would benefit from breaking with President Basescu's Iraq policy. It also probably cost him a Party vice-president position at the recent PNL convention (reported ref b).

12. (C) Immediately following the resignation, two names were floated in press reports and comments by Liberal Party leaders as potential candidates to be the next foreign minister: former PNL Senator and ex foreign minister Teodor Melescanu and the current vice president of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly Mihail Lupoi. However, the Prime Minister's chief of staff, Mihnea Constantinescu, told DCM that he had recommended to the PM this evening that the Prime Minister not make a precipitous decision about a new Foreign Minister. He urged the PM to avoid choosing either Melescanu or Lupoi -- both Tariceanu loyalists but not widely admired. Melescanu, for instance, was Foreign Minister in the mid-nineties during the earlier Iliescu presidency, before Romania had set a firm course towards NATO and EU membership. Constantinescu volunteered that the list of eligible names of a good caliber within Liberal ranks is not a long one.

13. (C) Insiders offered varying accounts of the resignation, although they agreed tonight that the Minister's tenure was indeed over. Constantinescu claimed that the PM had not initially planned to seek Ungureanu's resignation. When the two spoke by phone earlier today (the Foreign Minister was in Vienna with his wife and newborn baby), Tariceanu complained about the Foreign Ministry's poor handling of the Iraq contractor case, and Ungureanu apparently offered his resignation. The Prime Minister, under pressure from his anti-Basescu Liberal Party political

advisors to fire the Foreign Minister outright, settled on the middle course of having the Council of Ministers Press Service issue a statement saying that Tariceanu has asked for Ungureanu's resignation, and that the FM had accepted. Ungureanu's communications director Corina Vintan defended the Ministry's handling of the detained contractors. She said that she had been in the process of preparing a press statement explaining the Ministry's actions when the government's own press release was issued. When asked whether it was the final word, Vintan said "yes," reporting that when the Foreign Minister had hesitated during his conversation with Tariceanu, the Prime Minister made it clear that he would withdrawal all political support from Ungureanu if he did not step down. Vintan also reported that the Foreign Minister would return to Romania tomorrow and give a press conference.

13. (C) Comment: Ungureanu has become the latest victim of the ongoing war between Basescu and Tariceanu. The Romanian contractors detained three months ago by MNF-I, and ironically freed the same day as Ungureanu's resignation, merely provided a convenient excuse for the Prime Minister's increasingly ruthless group of political handlers to move against someone they have long seen as disloyal and outside of their control. It is yet another case of a popular, up and coming political figure in Liberal ranks being shown the door -- after other top Liberals like former PM Stolojan and former Culture Minister Musca. For the moment, Ungureanu's departure looks like a net loss for our diplomatic engagement, particularly if the Prime Minister decides to name a new Foreign Minister based mostly on political loyalty; especially someone who turns out to be less supportive than Ungureanu of Romania's Euro-Atlantic goals or Romania's substantial commitments in Iraq and Afghanistan. The next salvo will likely be from President Basescu's side

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of the barricade. End comment.
TAUBMAN